The Mystery of the Incarnation

- Father J E Canavan, SJ

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We assume in this essay that the Gospels are genuine and authentic records of a person who really lived, of facts which actually happened, of words which were uttered. We assume further that God exists as a Trinity of Persons; that the Second Person, or the Word, when the fullness of time had some, took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born into the world. We take for granted the fact of the Incarnation because it is clearly revealed in the Gospels. We do not intend to prove that Jesus Christ is truly God; the demonstration of that fact is worked out elsewhere. We shall endeavor to explain in accordance with Catholic teaching, the nature of the Incarnation, what it means, what it involves, its motives and its object.

In discussing this subject, we must never for a moment forget that we are handling a mystery, the deepest mystery, perhaps, of our faith. The Incarnation, the union of the divine with a human nature, is a thing so remote from any human experience, so beyond the compass of our intellects that we are unable to grasp the manner of its accomplishment, even after it has been revealed. We know it is so, we cannot explain how. We must rely on what we are told in the inspired writing of the Evangelists and Apostles, and by the infallible Church. All our reasoning on this mystery must be conditioned, qualified, and corrected by the Gospel store and by the dogmas of the Church. If we do not see clearly how the Incarnation was brought about, even if it seems, at first sight, to run counter to rational principles, we are not, therefore, to conclude that it could not have taken place. We accept the fact on incontestable authority; and our philosophic tenets, which may appear to contradict

of deny its possibility, must then be modified to fit the act. Our human intellects are not the measure of all truth; our human powers are not the only criterion of what is possible or impossible with God. We must recognize that limitations of human reasoning, else we are forced to deny the existence of mysteries. If we could explain the Incarnation it would no longer be a mystery, and Saint Paul could not describe it, and he does in the Epistle to the Colossians (1:26), as the "mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations."

The fact is, our philosophical principles, true, maybe, as far as they go, do not cover the whole ground. They are, at best, more or less accurate summaries of experience; but a Trinity of Persons, in one identical nature (which is essentially involved in the Incarnation), is a thing completely outside and beyond all human experience. The supernatural is necessarily above the range and capacity, the comprehension and exigence of all created nature. The union of a human nature with a divine personality is a supernatural fact. We have no right to expect it; we cannot, by our unaided reason, see clearly that it is possible; and even after it has been revealed we cannot understand how it was brought about.

The Incarnation Is Befitting to God and Man

Once we are sure, from a careful study of the inspired Gospels, that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, we can see easily enough how thoroughly the Incarnation is in accord with all we know or think of God, how useful it is to man, and how it fills out and completes the divine economy of the universe. God is infinitely good; and it is a quality characteristic of goodness to diffuse itself, to share happiness and possessions with others in as intimate and generous a way as possible. God diffuses Himself, as it were,

through creation in a variety of ways He gives life, which is a faint though accurate imitation of the boundless, self-existent life of God Himself. In the supernatural order He gives grace, which, though it is a created finite thing, makes us His adopted sons and heirs to His kingdom. By the Incarnation, God communicates *Himself*, for the infinite Person fo the Word is united to a human nature, and by the union the man Christ is brought into being. It is difficult to see how even God could have done more.

The incarnation seems to be the ultimate exercise of the divine power. Components infinitely removed from each other, the divine and human, are joined together in a single person. Nothing short of infinite wisdom and intelligence could have discovered the possibility of bringing together elements so disparate; nothing short of divine omnipotence could have carried the idea into action.

The Incarnation, too, is the greatest glory of the human race. It puts God's seal upon the dignity of man. Human nature itself, the whole race of men, is, in a sense, deified by God's graceful condescension. It we are wise, we judge of a type by its highest and not by its lowest manifestation. The greatest man whom the world has seen is the measure of the dignity to which man can attain; and by this standard should we estimate our fellows. Our view of man's work and destiny can never be what it might have been if the Word had not become incarnate. For a man now is the head and lord of the universe.

Besides, we have now a teacher instructing us in all those things which must deeply concern us, not by precept along, but by example. We have heard God speaking of the things of God with human lips; we have heard Him, speaking out of His vast knowledge, correcting out philosophies and estimating the value of our lives. Man is not too great for his

destiny, as so many modern writers bewail; for there are awaiting him things which the eye hath not seen or the heart dreamed of. We have now a clue to the most baffling and disturbing of natural experiences, the mystery of pain, for we have seen Him, who is the uncreated Wisdom of the God-head, appraising our sufferings and enduring our pains. We are, too, drawn sweetly on to hope, for her, as nowhere else, God's saving will is manifest even to the incredulous; for one motive of the Incarnation was our redemption. But above all, we are roused to love; and to love deeply the proper objects is to have mastered the art of living. Love begets love; love of god is the noblest exercise of charity. The Incarnation is the most conclusive proof of God's love for us; and by the depth of that condescension, the divine love for man must be computed. So sincerely did God love man that He became man.

God became man freely. He was not compelled to become incarnate. This act of His was not compelled to become incarnate. This act of His has always been regarded as His greatest grace to man. If a grace, then it was not merited by us, we had no claim to it, we could have no expectation of it. God did not owe it to Himself to redeem us from sin, and certainly not in this extraordinary manner. God could have left men unredeemed as He left the fallen angels, or He could have repaired the evil otherwise than by the Incarnation, or condoned it gratuitously. Only on one hypothesis was He bound to become man, namely, on the supposition that He exacted from man himself condign and complete satisfaction for sin.

Satisfaction and Redemption

To satisfy is to compensate voluntarily the offended person by rendering to him an equivalent for the injury inflicted upon him. Sin is an injury to God, but the injury is of the

nature of an offense. When we sin we outrage God by refusing Him the obedience due to Him; and satisfaction would mean the performance, in God's honor, of some act which would please more than, or at least as much as, the offense displeased Him. Such satisfaction would be what theologians call "condign," if that service were the exact equivalent of the offense, that is, if it had in itself the same power to please as the sin had to displease. It would be "congruous" merely if it did not possess this strict equivalence, but was accepted by God as sufficient. Thus, a thief makes condign satisfaction when he pays back the whole sum which he has stolen; congruous when he does not restore the whole amount, but only some part of it, which the owner, out of generosity, regards as sufficient compensation.

An offense, by which we mean the refusal to give anther the honor and deference due to him, is not to be measured as we measure injury in material goods. If it is taken illicitly, condign satisfaction is made when it is repaid. If we offend another by treating him outrageously, we do not always make condign satisfaction by tendering an apology. Other circumstances must be taken into account - the station and dignity of the person offended, the standing of the person who offends. Further, the considerations which deepen the malice of the offense lessen the value of the satisfaction. Thus, if a highly-placed nobleman strikes a king, the offense might be comparatively trivial, and satisfaction an easy acknowledgement of fault or an attestation of loyalty. Why? Because the high station of the offender, a consideration which diminishes his offense, increases at the same time the merit of his compensating service. But if a groom were to strike a king, much more would be exacted from him before he could be considered to have satisfied for his act. The low station of the offender, in this instance, at one and the same

time increases the offense and diminishes the value of the amends he may with to make.

Sin, even though its malice may not be infinite, is an offense against a being by nature and dignity infinitely above the offender. Sin is in an order of things to which the satisfactions of a mere man can never attain. Offense is given to a divine person. If God, then, determines to exact from man condign satisfaction for sin, He must decree that God should become man, for thus only can the infinite distance be bridged between offender and offended. No being less than God could make condign satisfaction for sin, for to be other than God is to be infinitely less than God. The Incarnation, on this hypothesis, becomes an imperative necessity. The Fathers of the Church deduce the divinity of Christ from the fact that He did make such satisfaction, which He could not have done were He not God. "If He were not God," says Saint Leo, "He could have provided no remedy."

Redemption from sin by way of making condign satisfaction for the offense, was one sufficient motive for the Incarnation. But it was not the only, nor, indeed, the principal motive. There were other reasons impelling God to decree this mystery, reasons so urgent that the Word would more probably have become incarnate even if Adam had not sinned. There was, first, the wonder and excellence of the mystery itself, in which, as we have shown, God's wisdom, power, goodness, and love are so convincingly portrayed. The Incarnation was worth accomplishing for its own sake, because no other exercise of omnipotence can give such glory to God.

This view has support in Scripture. Saint Paul, in the Epistle to the Colossians (1:15), refers to Our Lord as "the firstborn of every creature." The Fathers, as a general rule,

interpreting this text, apply it to Christ as man. He was not, certainly, the first-born in time; the angels and many men existed before He was born into the world. He must, therefore, if He is to take precedence of every creature, have been first in God's decree. God must have first decided that the Word should become incarnate, and, subsequent to this decision, have brought other things into being. Again, in the Epistle to the Ephesians (1:4) Saint Paul says that "God chose us in Him (Christ) before the constitution of the world." He could not have chosen us in the Word not yet incarnate. Christ did not, in point of fact, exist before the constitution of the world. Therefore, He must have existed in a Divine decree; God, before He constituted the world, must have intended Christ to exist. Before Adam's sin was taken into account before the world was founded, god had decreed that the Word should become flesh. If Adam had not fallen, Christ would not have been born in suffering flesh, because He would not then have had to work out our salvation in His pain; but He would have come in impassible flesh.

This view is all the more attractive if we take into account its implications. God first decreed the union of the Word with a created nature; then, in order to do honor to this Divine Person destined to become man, He called into existence the whole majestic universe, angels, men, the myriad forms of life, the beauty and order of the world. They were made to provide for Christ as man a kingdom over which He might rule. Everything they have, their being, their gifts of grace, are derived from God through Our Lord. They are, because His coming was foreseen. Through Christ, God drew, as it were, the inspiration to create. Later, but in the same decree, God, fore-knowing Adam's disobedience, ordained that the man Christ should redeem the fallen race by His suffering, and for this purpose He, the King, came in the guise of a servant; subject to hunger, weariness, and death.

He would have come in any case, but because Adam sinned He came to die.

If the Redeemer was to make condign satisfaction for sin, He would have to be God. If He was to make satisfaction as one of the human race, He would have to be man. That Jesus Christ was God is not within our province to prove; we assume here that He was. We are more concerned with the truth that He was a real man, like to us in everything except sin.

Nowadays, all those who accept the Gospels at all as historical documents readily acknowledge the central figure in them to be a real man. He was at least that. But in the early days of Christianity this truth was questioned on various grounds. The Phantasiasts, unable to see how God could die, which would have happened if Our Lord had a mortal body, evaded the difficulty by asserting boldly that the Christ of the Gospels was merely a phantom or a shade. The Doketists, too, denied that Christ was a real man because, if He were, He would have a material body, a thing not to be allowed since according to the Doketists, all matter was created by the devil. Consequently, He bore merely the semblance of a body. He only *seemed* to be a man. The Monothelites did not go so far as to deny the reality of the human nature, but they denied to Christ as man a human will. The Word, then, would have assumed not a perfect but a mutilated human nature; and, as we shall see later, the Redemption, which involves essentially the offering to God of the death and merits of Christ by an act of His human will, would, on Catholic principles, be impossible.

The theory of Phantasiasts and Docketists is, however, subversive of Christianity, for a real death and resurrection are, as Tertullian points out, rejected by it. The wonder of the Incarnation is dissolved into a trick, the Gospels are a story

of deceit, and our faith is vain. Christ was not what He appeared to be, and the grounds on which we build our trust in Him are rendered nugatory.

The Councils condemn this doctrine as heretical and state against it the Catholic teaching. A profession of faith, compiled substantially in apostolic times, but amplified later in accordance with the canons o the Council of Nicaea in 325, and known now as the *Symbol of Epiphanius*, was proposed to the catechumens in the East before Baptism. One passage of it runs as follows,

> "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten of God the Father, who for us men and for our salvation descended from heaven and was made incarnate, that is, begotten truly by the Holy Ghost from Mary ever Virgin, was made man, that is, assumed a complete human nature, soul and body and intellect and everything which is a man, except sin."

In 449, Saint Leo I, writing in a dogmatic letter to the Council of Chalcedon against Eutyches, who had denied two natures in Christ, asserted that "true God was born in the complete and perfect nature of a true man, complete in his own, complete in ours." The Fathers assembled at Chalcedon applauded this doctrine, and adopted it as the final expression of Catholic belief.

Jesus Christ, then, is a true man having a human body and a human soul, human senses and sensibilities. As such He is represented to us in the Gospels, the Apostolic epistles, the Conciliar definitions, and the writings of the Fathers. All who assert the contrary have ever been regarded as heretics and expelled from the Christian communion. For to deny this is to run directly counter to inspired testimony and the whole torrent of tradition.

The Blessed Virgin consequently, is the mother of Christ, in the same sense as other women are the mothers of the children they bear. In the Gospels Our Lord is called "the Son of David born of Mary." In the Epistle to the Galatians Saint Paul says that "God sent His own son born, born of a woman." If Our Lord did not derive His body from His mother, if He was not, as the Athanasian Creed puts it, "born in time from the substance of His mother," He could not be styled her son in any real sense of the word.

The Hypostatic Union

The Second Person of the Trinity, then, assumed a human body and a human soul, the essential elements of a human nature. The Word did not, as some heretics have maintained, take the place and fulfill the functions of the human soul, but He drew to Himself a nature which is really distinct and complete, with all its proper perfections and attributes, and stands apart from the Person of the Word. We do not mean that the body and soul of Christ was first created, and then, after a lapse of time, assumed hypostatically; there was no interval between the infusion of the soul into the body and the assumption of both by the Word. At the very instant when the soul and body were joined together so as to constitute a human nature, at that moment the Word assumed the nature and the Man-God came into being. Nothing was lacking to the human nature of Christ; the human *person* never existed, its place being taken by the Person of the Word.

Therefore, there must be a real distinction between nature and personality, however much this conclusion may seem to be at variance with facts as we observe them in the natural order. In Christ there is a human nature lacking no essential characteristic; in Christ there is no human personality. Therefore, nature and personality are not the same, because

we can have one apart from the other. Personality does not enter into the constitution of nature. If things are allowed to take their natural course, if no divine interposition occurs, the union of a body with a rational soul results in a person. That is to say, each individual rational nature is a person. There exists now not merely something but *some one*, a definite personality utterly distinct from the whole universe, an agent responsible for its acts and possessing its own rights. But an individual rational nature is not a person in every order of being. The divine nature which is individual, complete, single, is communicated to Three Persons. Christ's individual, complete human nature is not a human person, for if it were there would be two persons in Christ, whereas, in point of fact, there is only one, and that one the divine Person of the Word. If we were to ask, pointing at Christ, "Who is this man?" we should be compelled to answer, "This man is the Second Person of the Trinity." Personality gives to an individual nature its identity, making it, as the philosophers say, not communicable. The Divine nature is not a person because it is communicated to three persons; the human nature of Christ is not a person because it is communicated to the Person of the Word.

Nestorius and Eutyches, relying on philosophical principles drawn from the observation of natural phenomena, affirmed that every complete rational nature was a person. Nestorious, therefore, argued quite logically that there were in Christ two natures and two personalities, the human and the divine. Between these two distinct personalities there is nothing more than a moral union, such, for instance, as exists between two persons who love each other deeply. Jesus Christ, consequently, considered as man is not God, but a human person united to God by a close moral union. In our own times the Modernists have revived this heresy. Eutyches, arguing from the same premises as Nestorius, arrived at a different conclusion. He maintained that as

there was only one personality in Christ, there was only one nature, because, as the result of the union, the human and divine natures were fused into one.

The Catholic Church, keeping close to revealed truth, teaches authoritatively that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Eternal Word, assumed and united to Itself an integral human nature; and that this union is something more than the moral union begotten of a mutual love, or by voluntary agreement of wills, or by an in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the souls of the just, or by a communication of gifts such as obtains among friends, or by a sharing of dignity and title. The union is substantial, not accidental, as Nestorius held, and the result is that one divine person has two natures, that the Word while remaining God is also truly man. This is known as the hypostatic union, because the word *hypostasis* was used by the Council of Nicaea and the subsequent Councils to mean *person*. The human and divine natures were united in the hypostatis or person of the Word. The Person of the Word has two natures. The operations of the human nature, its acts of will and intellect, its fear, its pain, its pleasure, are human operations, but they are attributed to a divine person.

In the Creeds we recite, Our Blessed Lord is called the Son of God, and He is said to be born of the Virgin Mary. He who is God and before time is the same who is born into time. The Councils of the Church do not explain how this is accomplished. They merely assert the fact; and the fact is, precisely, the mystery of the Incarnation. The Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Canons of Ephesus and Chalcedon reiterate this truth in various forms.

> Though He is God and man, nevertheless there are not two but only one Christ...one not by the blending of

> substance but because of the unity of person. - *Athanasian Creed*
>
> If anyone refuses to confess that the Word of God the Father is united to flesh through the personality, and that there is one Christ with His own flesh, the same but God and man, let him be anathema. - *Council of Ephesus*

We may, consequently, predicate of the Second Person of the Trinity whatever is true of the man Christ. We may say that God died, because Christi died, that God thirsted because Christ thirsted. We may not, however, predicate of the divine *nature* what is true only of the human nature. We may not say that the humanity of Christ is immortal, or that the divinity was tortured with agony in the Garden, because the abstract terms "humanity" and "divinity" connote the human and the divine nature alone to the exclusion of each other. But since two natures coalesce in one person, we may predicate of this person whatever is true of either nature in the concrete. An example will make the point clear. Sugar is white and sweet. We cannot, therefore, say that whiteness, in the abstract, is sweetness, but we may say that this thing, in the concrete, is sweet. The two qualities, sweetness and whiteness, are found in the same substance; two natures, human and divine, subsist in the same personality. Therefore, in accordance with the principles just stated, though we may not say the divinity of Christ is the humanity, we may say that Christ is God and Christ is man. Because Christ died, we may say that God died. We may assert of Christ whatever is true of either nature, provided we do not exclude the person, and are careful that the predication is concrete. Thus, Saint Paul declares that if the Jews had known they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. Christ was crucified as man; He suffered in His human, not in His divine nature; and yet Saint Paul does not hesitate

to affirm that the Jews in killing Christ put to death the Lord of Glory.

Christ's Human Will

It follows that if there are two complete natures in Christ, there are two distinct intellects and two separate wills. Our Lord asserted His own identity, He said "I" with a twofold intellectual act; he was conscious of who He was through His divine intellect and through His human. Similarly, His human will had its proper functions and operated, as a distinct faculty, in its own sphere.

Against the Monothelites, who asserted that there was only one will in Christ, the Council of Lateran defined two wills and two operations. Operation or activity is a function of nature. Personality is not the efficient cause of action, though action is attributed to the person. So, if there are two natures, there are two operations peculiar and proper to each nature; and in the case of Christ, the one person gets, as it were, the credit of two sets of actions, emanating from two natures. The divine will elicits its own acts; the human will its own, different from the divine. When Christ loved with His human will, He elicited a human, not a divine act, though, on account of the unity of person, this human act was the act of God.

In fact, to one who reads the gospels, there appears to be not merely two wills in Christ, but, at first sight, two conflicting wills. For instance, in the Garden He rises from the struggle triumphant, exclaiming, "Not My Will but Thine be done," implying, as it seems, that the terror, the prostration of the agony and the sweat of blood, had been caused by the reluctance of the human will to carry out the wishes of the divine. In reality, it was not so, for, as we shall see later, there was in Christ no shadow of sin, no tendency

even, to put His will and inclination against the will of the Father. Christ in the Garden prayed that the chalice should pass from Him on condition that such was the Father's will. His absolute efficacious will was to submit to God's ordinance, to bow His head and endure even unto the death of the Cross. But His human will shrank from the ignominy and pain. His human courage faltered at the catastrophe, and a cry broke from His tormented heart. So a soldier ordered to lead an attack against a heavily fortified position might wish, when he thought of his home and family, that things had been arranged otherwise, but, nevertheless, at the appointed time acts bravely on his orders. So Christ's will was firmly set in the mandate He had received from God.

Christ's Human Intellect

Christ's human intellect, too, though it enjoyed the Beatific Vision, even though when Our Lord was a wayfarer on earth, it saw and knew God as He is, as the blessed see Him in heaven, still His human intellect was limited in range and capacity. It had in the highest degree all that knowledge of which a created intelligence is capable, but not the depth and breadth of divine omniscience. It did not comprehend God, nor exhaust utterly the knowledge which God has of Himself.

If Our Lord, even while He was a pilgrim among men, enjoyed the Beatific Vision, the difficulty at once arises: How could He suffer, as His is related to have done? Does not the vision of God flood the soul with delight, ravish it with beauty, and expel all sadness? Is it possible for the soul to contain at one and the same time, such joy as Christ must have had in the Beatific Vision, and such sorrow as He certainly had in the Garden and on the Cross? Would not the joy over-master and banish the grief, or would not the grief, if it were allowed to arise, lessen the joy?

The faithful believe, and doubtless with good reason, that there will be no sadness in heaven, that God will there wipe away the tear from every eye. But this happy state is not so founded in the nature of things that it could not be otherwise. In itself, it is quite possible, say, for a mother while enjoying the Beatific Vision and being gladdened by it beyond measure, to grieve for the misfortunes of children whom she has left behind. It is matter of common experience that we can entertain both grief and joy at the same time, and at a pitch of high intensity. The objects round which these contrary emotions circle are the same; the motives are different. Thus, a Catholic mother, bereft of her child, might feel the loss deeply, and, at the same time, be just as deeply glad that the little one was safe, beyond the power of the world to harm it, its brief probation happily ended. So, too, Our Lord could have sorrowed and rejoiced in the same experience, but on different grounds. And even though His joy was founded in the Vision of god, which naturally excludes all shadow of sadness God could, for certain high ends which He had in view, interfere with His usual providence, and, without withdrawing the Vision, allow sorrow to play upon the soul of Christ. It was, it is true, due to Our Lord, to His dignity and office, that He should be granted the Vision of God and the full measure of its joy; it was, on the other hand, good for us to see the Saviour suffer; and so God gave the one and left the capacity for the other.

In addition to the knowledge drawn from the Beatific Vision and another kind, known as inspired knowledge, by which Our Lord knew the essences of things and the secrets of hearts, and the history of the future, there was in Christ an entirely natural human knowledge which He acquired gradually by His own industry and observation, and which was limited to the objects which fell directly under His senses and the inferences which flowed naturally from them.

This knowledge was exactly similar in kind to ours. Christ, we are told, grew in wisdom. He advanced in knowledge, as we do, from day to day, because, like other men, He went through the usual stages of growth. His powers increased, His experience widened, His human perception and sympathies deepened. Even as man, He was not ignorant of anything, it we take all His sources of knowledge into consideration, and if we define ignorance as the privation of such knowledge as one ought to possess, for His judgments were always corrected and restrained from error. But if we take in account merely His acquired or experimental knowledge, He could not be expected to know much more than the most gifted Galilean peasant of His times.

How these three kinds of knowledge, the Beatific, the infused, the acquired, ran side by side in Christ without overlapping or absorbing each other, is part of the mystery of the Incarnation. We feel certain that it was so, though we cannot say how. We assent to the facts, even though we cannot harmonize them. It we deny to Christ Beatific and infused knowledge we do an injury to His majesty; if we deny Him acquired or experimental knowledge, we do an injury to His humanity, for it is characteristic of human knowledge that it grows slowly, little by little, and mellows with the passage of years. Our Lord was a man, like us in everything, except sin; therefore like us in this.

Christ's human nature was, further, subject to those passions and defects which are common to man. For the body to be mortal, to be capable of fatigue, etc., are defects, because they are the negation of a higher perfection. They are limitations of human nature. And when we say that the Word assumed the passions, common to human nature, we mean that the Word assumed , in the human body of Christ, those feelings which operate through the organs of sense. When Christ, for instance, was angry with the money

changers in the temple, He felt the physical excitement of anger just as other men do. We do not, however, mean to imply that the Word assumed any passion which suggests moral evil, nor any movement of the soul which could be an incitement to sin.

Sinlessness and Sanctity of Christ

Our Blessed Lord could not sin. The Beatific Vision, which excludes everything contrary to the love of God, excludes, in consequence, all sin. Nay, further, even if Our Lord had not the Beatific Vision, had not sanctifying grace, still because of the dignity of His Person, because of the hypostatic union between His human nature and the Word, He could not sin. Our Lord, because of the hypostatic union was, even as man, the natural Son of God. We through sanctifying grace, which is a created supernatural gift inheriting in our souls, are made the adopted sons of god, His friends, the objects of His love, the heirs to his kingdom. God loves His adopted sons because they are sharers of His nature through a supernatural quality; God loves Christ's human nature because it is the possession of a divine Being. The hypostatic union produced in Christ's human nature all those effects which sanctifying grace produces in us, and as grace and sin are incompatible so the hypostatic union and sin are incompatible. And as the union, once brought about, is indissoluble, Christ's human nature must be perpetually holy and pleasing to God.

In Our Lord's human nature is sanctified because of the hypostatic union with the Person of the Word, it is evidence that the sole measure of its holiness is the capacity of the nature itself. The Word is infinitely holy and can, therefore, communicate its sanctity infinitely. The human nature is finite, and as such is not capable of infinite perfection. It may, however, partake of a perfection in the highest degree

possible to a creature. If it were capable of sinning it would not participate in the divine sanctity in the highest degree possible to a creature, for it is within the capacity of a creature not merely to avoid actual sin, but to be so holy as to be incapable of sinning at all.

Not only could there have been no actual rebellion of Christ's human will against God's, there could not even have been an incipient stirring in that direction. "What is pleasing to the Father," says Christ, "I do always." There was in Christ no inclination to transgress. His sensitive appetite never rose, in the slightest degree, against the dictate of reason, nor could it. There was no stain or taint in His nature. Sin held no seduction for Him, no attractiveness. How, then, could he have been tempted, as we are told He was, by the devil, after His fast in the wilderness?

To tempt is to propose maliciously to one who can be swayed by passion, some object which can stir him to sadness or fear or some other passion. God, consequently, never tempts because he never proposes an object to us in a malicious spirit. Temptation, therefore, differs from sin, just as a goal differs from the road that leads to it. Satan, in tempting Our Lord, put before Him certain objects which he thought might move the will. From this point of view, such action was temptation, external temptation, if we wish. But strictly speaking, it was not a temptation to Christ, because temptation always implies an effort at resistance, a combat between duty and seduction to illicit pleasure. The objects presented by the devil fell, in the case of Christ, upon a will, ever prompt to obey the dictate of reason. His appetites were never rebellious; they were even docile to control.

Jesus Christ, A Priest

Jesus Christ, as man, performed certain functions or offices to which He had been appointed by God. He was, for instance, a priest. Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews (5:1) describes in some detail the essential marks and functions of a priest, and says that these are fulfilled in Our Lord.

> For every high-priest taken from among men, is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that they may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins.

A priest, then, is one who has been legitimately appointed to offer sacrifice and to mediate between God and man. It is clear that God does not offer sacrifice in honor of Himself; therefore, Christ as God is not a priest, but only Christ as man. Christ as man and through His human will exercised priestly functions. His oblation of the victim was a human act, though it was dignified infinitely by the Person of the Word to whom the human will was hypostatically united and to whom its action was attributed. Consequently, since the sacrifice was the act of God it was infinitely meritorious and pleasing to God. But Christ's oblation on the Cross was an act of His human, not of His divine, will, because He redeemed us in the human and not in His divine nature, which could not suffer.

In the sacrifice on the Cross Our Lord was at one and the same time Victim and Priest. This does not mean that He slew Himself, for it is not essential to sacrifice that the priest should slay the victim. It is necessary for sacrifice that a creature should be destroyed or made to suffer some change in recognition of God's supreme dominion over the world which He has made; and it is sufficient if this slaying is done by any agency, whether the priest's or another's. Thus, in the Temple services among the Jews, the Levite slew the victims, and the priests offered them on the altar. So, in the

instances of Christ, the slaying was done by the executioners. The Victim on the cross was a divine person having human nature, slain by the Jews, but offered as sacrifice to God in expiation of sin by the high-priest, Jesus Christ Himself.

Further, Christ exercised the officer of Redeemer. He satisfied for our sins, abundantly and entirely. If sin is conceived as an offense against God, then to offer satisfaction for sin is to perform an act, to do such homage to God, that He is more pleased by this action than He was displeased by the offense. The human body and the human soul of the Lord were violently separated on the Cross, and He died. Death was worked out in the human nature; but as there was only a divine person in Christ, the act of dying was the act of the second Person of the Trinity, and, as such, infinitely pleasing to God. Thus abundant satisfaction was made for the offense of sin.

Jesus Christ The Redeemer

In what relation did Our Blessed Lord stand to God and to us when He was working out our redemption? Rationalists and some Protestants affirm that His actions have no satisfying quality in themselves, that they did not on their own merits redeem us from the slavery of sin. Christ, according to them, saved us by His example by holding up to us an ideal of conduct, by leading the way along the path of virtue. Moreover, he represented God to us as a Father, as a Bring who loved us and was concerned for our welfare. Thus, by doctrine, by example, by precept, Christ stirred us to love the things that are above, the God, the Father, from whose knowledge and allegiance men had strayed. He redeemed us by preaching to us. The work of Redemption was altogether in the moral order, it did not transcend the moral sphere. When Christ had aroused in us the dormant and

forgotten love of God, His work on earth was complete. The Modernists concur more or less with this view.

We, on the other hand, maintain that the Redemption is altogether distinct from the teaching ministry of the Saviour. Even if He had never spoken in parables, or instructed us in the principles of the kingdom, he would have redeemed us. Christ could have redeemed us, but any one action, for each of His actions had this value in itself. Everything He did pleased God far more than sin displeased. The works of Christ were more than an equivalent for the malice of sin.

Among those who defend this view of the Redemption there is, however, a divergence of opinion with regard to the relation in which Christ stood to an offended God. How did the Father regard the human life, labor, and suffering of His Son?

Many Protestants and a few Catholics (Cardinal Bellarmine, for instance, replying on the well-known Chapter 53 of Isaias, in which the Messias is described as really bearing or bruises, as wounded for our iniquities, as taking on Himself our sins, contend that Our Lord redeemed us by standing in our place, by taking upon Himself the guilt and the punishment of our sins, though He was Himself sinless. So a rich man might take upon himself a friend's debts, make himself so responsible for them as to render himself liable to penalties if he omitted payment. Morally, but this act, he becomes the debtor; he takes over in a legal and formal way his friend's liabilities.

But there are grave difficulties against this view of the Redemption. The passage quoted from Isaias is couched in very figurative language, and does not force us to accept the Protestant theory of substitution. It can be explained in quite another and equally probable sense. And, further, the

theory of substitution offends our sense of propriety and justice. It is at least unedifying to regard Christ as a sinner; and there is something repellent in representing the Father as so regarding the Son. If Christ really stood in the place of the sinner, then the Father would be compelled to be hostile to Him, as He is to other sinners. Now, this cannot be, for Christ was holy with an uncreated holiness, and as such loved by God. He could not be loved and abhorred at the same time. Then, too, it runs counter to our conception of justice to punish the innocent for the crimes of the guilty. But such would be the conduct of God if He punished Christ for the sins of the recalcitrant human race. If he were follow this theory to its logical conclusion, we should have to contend that if Christ really stood before god as a sinner He would have to undergo the pains and penalties of sin. He could not adopt our sin without at the same time adopting the status of a sinner. He would, therefore, be deprived of grave, of the heritage of heaven; He would incur the debt of eternal punishment until such time as He performed some redeeming act. But from this harsh conclusion even the Protestants shrink.

The common Catholic theory is that Christ redeemed us, not by standing in our place, not by substituting Himself for us, but by offering to God a work which pleased Him far more than sin displeased Him. Thus, one friend may pay the debt of another without in any way incurring the debt himself. It is not essential to the idea of satisfaction that the Redeemer should bear the pains and penalties, or shoulder the difficulties of those for whom He makes satisfaction. Furthermore, by holding this view we escape the inconvenience of the other. The Son is not estranged from the Father; the innocent one is not punished for the sins of the guilty. Piety and justice are not outraged, and the Redemption is sufficiently explained.

No human being was excluded from the scope of the Redemption. We do not mean merely that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for the liberation of the whole human race, if it were applied for that purpose, but that, in point of fact, it was so applied. Calvinists and Jansenists maintain that Christ died only for the predestined, that the rest were shut out from His mercy. Catholics teach that Our Blessed Lord died for all, that as the Incarnation is a work of love, so the Redemption was meant for all, even for those who would be lost eternally. We are dealing now not with the actual but with the ideal extent of Christ's satisfaction. We do not here defend that all are saved, but we do say that Christ sincerely wishes the salvation of all, that He lived and died for the benefit of all. The Council of Trent puts the Catholic doctrine clearly when it states that "God sent His Son in order that *all* should receive the adoption of sons." If a soul is lost, the calamity is not due to any economy on the part of our Redeemer, but solely to a will which refuses to use the graces merited by Christ. He died even for those who reject His teaching and bring to naught His passion.

About This eBook

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The cover image is a detail from the painting *Incarnation of Jesus* by Piero di Cosimo, c.1505, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

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